No. 1

Museum Notes

INFORMATION SHEETS

from the

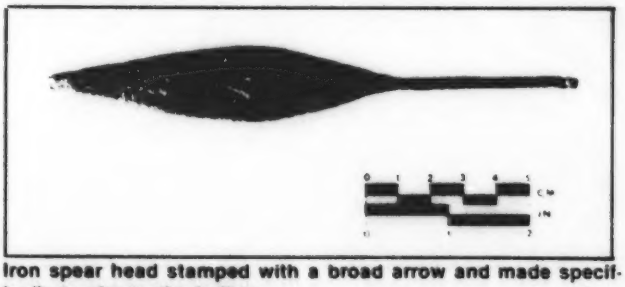
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

The Beothuks

At present we cannot be absolutely certain of the origins of the Beothuk Indians, but it seems most likely that they were the descendants of the Maritime Archaic people of Newfoundland and Labrador. It also appears that the Beothuk language is part of a great family of languages called Algonkian, variations of which are spoken by the Montagnais-Naskapi of Labrador and the Micmacs of the Maritime provinces.

The Beothuks were similar to the Micmacs and to the Maritime Archaic Indians in other ways as well. Like them, the Beothuks spent most of the year along the coasts where they lived largely upon fish, seals, sea birds, eggs, shellfish, and the like. For part of the winter, before seals were available, the Beothuks went inland where they hunted caribou, beaver, ptarmigan, and hare. When it was cold they lived in substantial multi-sided houses made of logs. The logs were set into the ground and topped with a framework of poles covered with bark and insulated with moss. To make these houses even warmer, earth was sometimes piled around the low walls, or the interior of the house was dug out slightly. In summer their dwellings were less permanent structures of poles covered with bark or skin. Depending upon the weather, the Beothuks wore a caribou-skin mantle with caribou mocassins, leggings,mittens, and arm-coverings, any of which could be discarded as it grew warmer. When deep snow covered the ground, the Beothuks travelled on snowshoes. When the ice left the waters of the coasts and the interior, they used bark canoes somewhat similar in shape to those of the Micmacs.

Beothuk weapons also resembled those of neighbouring native peoples. To kill caribou, they employed a long spear, perhaps twelve feet in length, which was probably originally tipped with bone or stone; however, with the coming of Europeans, the Beothuks tended to substitute iron for local material when possible. For example, the preferred weapon for taking sea mammals was a bone toggling harpoon with an iron end-blade. Except for the fact that this blade was of iron, it greatly resembles harpoons used by early Eskimo peoples. Beothuk bows were of maple, ash, or spruce, and were about five feet long. Their arrows were of pine, according to one authority, and were feathered with goose feathers. Arrowheads were made of bone, stone, and later, iron. These materials were also used for a variety of other implements such as knives, hide-scrapers, and so forth. Bark was extensively used for all sorts of containers.

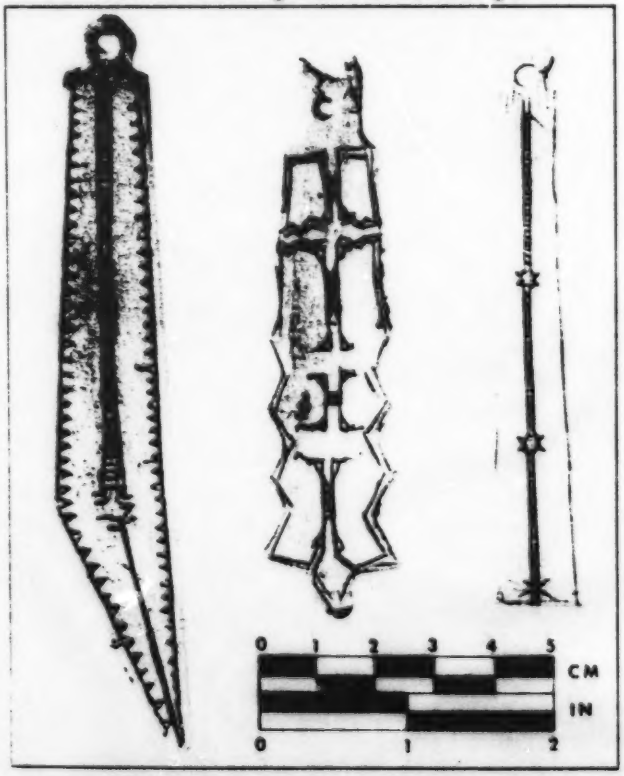


Iron spear head stamped with a broad arrow and made specifically to give to the Indians.

We know much more about how the Beothuks got their living from the Newfoundland environment than we do about how their society was organized and what their religious beliefs were. Most of what we know about other Indians' social and religious matters comes to us from the accounts of early explorers, traders, and missionaries. For a variety of reasons, however, such sources of information about the Beothuks are scarce. One reason is simply that the Beothuks were so few in number, the possibilities of contact with Europeans were less than was generally the case elsewhere. Estimates of the number of Beothuks in Newfoundland at the time of initial European contact vary, but no serious student of the subject has suggested that they numbered more than 2,000 and most would say half that number.

Nonetheless, there were encounters between Europeans and Beothuks, starting as early perhaps as 1500. One of the most informative early accounts of a meeting between Europeans and Beothuks was left by John Guy who in 1612 was in Trinity Bay attempting to establish an English colony. Guy's party got along quite well with a small group of Beothuks with whom they spent a short time. Yet after that, over 150 years passed with almost no mention of the Beothuks in the historical records of the period. This would be unusual elsewhere in North America, but it can be explained by the fact that Newfoundland was not like other European colonies. For a long time, most Europeans who came here did so to fish, not to convert Indians to Christianity, nor to trade with them for furs. This meant that there were few Europeans on the island who were interested in making peaceful contact with the Beothuks.

Despite this, it is still surprising that there was not more trade between Europeans and Beothuks. Elsewhere in North America, Indians were immediately struck by the technological superiority of European goods and rushed to begin trading furs in exchange for these items. Why didn't this happen in Newfoundland? It may be that the Beothuks did not need to trade furs for European goods because they could steal them so easily. Newfoundland was, after all, a fishing colony which meant that for part of the year there were abandoned premises from which the Beothuks could pilfer iron and canvas. The iron would then be re-fashioned into spear and arrowheads and the canvas into coverings for their dwellings.



Carved bone pendants used as amulets and attached to skin burial bags or hung on clothing.

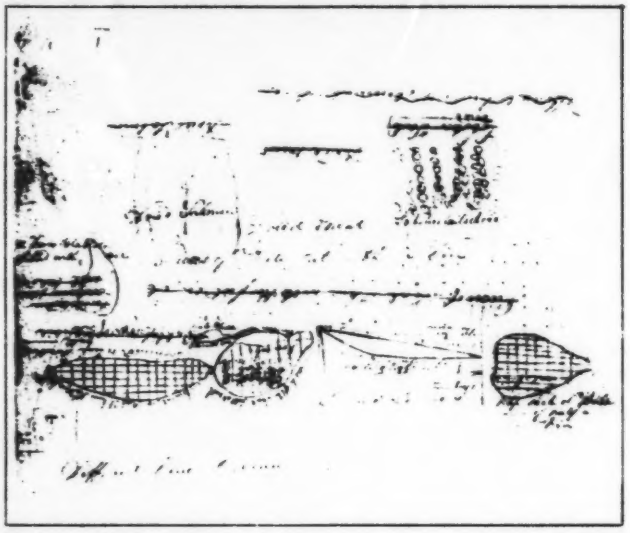
Of course, the fishermen resented this thievery and on occasion took revenge. It cannot be denied that Europeans killed Beothuks for these and other reasons. It is unlikely, however, that this was the primary reason for their eventual extinction. One historian has calculated that even if no Beothuks had been murdered by Europeans, it is possible that they would have died out as a result of the ravages of European diseases. Other Indian peoples, most with populations larger than those of the Beothuks, became extinct largely due to these new diseases. Native peoples simply lacked immunity to the diseases which Europeans brought with them — even relatively minor ones such as measles and mumps were deadly to Indians. A single contact between a European and an Indian could set off waves of epidemics, which radiated out from their source like the ripples of a stone cast into a pool.

Perhaps as important as disease in accounting for the demise of the Beothuks was spreading European settlement, especially in Bonavista and Notre Dame Bays which eventually prevented the Beothuks from regularly travelling to the coasts where they obtained most of their food. After about 1750, the Beothuks were then forced to spend an increasing amount of time inland, around Red Indian Lake and along the Exploits River. There they lived largely upon caribou and small game. It was just not possible, however, to live solely upon the resources of the interior, and increasingly the Beothuks found themselves facing starvation. This also must have weakened their resistance to European diseases, particularly tuberculosis.

It was about this time that important settlers in Newfoundland began to take an interest in the Beothuks. This was something new, for as we have seen, little official notice of the Beothuks had been taken since John Guy's time. Their existence was known of course, but they were little more than a nuisance to the few fishermen who came in contact with them. Then in 1768, the British naval governor of Newfoundland, Sir Hugh Palliser, decided to try to establish friendly relations with the Beothuks as he was outraged by reports of fishermen murdering Indians. Palliser was, in fact, acting quite in the spirit of his age. This was a time when Europeans had begun to feel a sense of guilt about the way they treated Indians, slaves, and even some unfortunate members of their own society. In late summer, Palliser sent two military officers, John and George Cartwright, up the Exploits River to persuade the Beothuks that the British government wished to bring about peace.

Unfortunately the Cartwrights did not find any Beothuks; however, they did see evidence of Beothuk settlement and they estimated that the whole Beothuk tribe only numbered about 500. Their guess may well have been too high although there is no way of knowing for sure. John Cartwright also brought back some misleading information — stories that Micmacs were killing many Beothuks. The Micmacs had been coming to Newfoundland from Cape Breton since

1600, but there is no solid evidence that they had been slaughtering Beothuks. There may have been the occasional fight between Micmac trappers and Beothuk hunters, but it seems clear that the Micmacs were not responsible in any significant way for the extermination of the Beothuks. Nor is there any truth to the stories which still persist that Micmacs were brought to Newfoundland by the French to kill Beothuks. The Micmacs came to Newfoundland to trap and to kill caribou, not Beothuks.



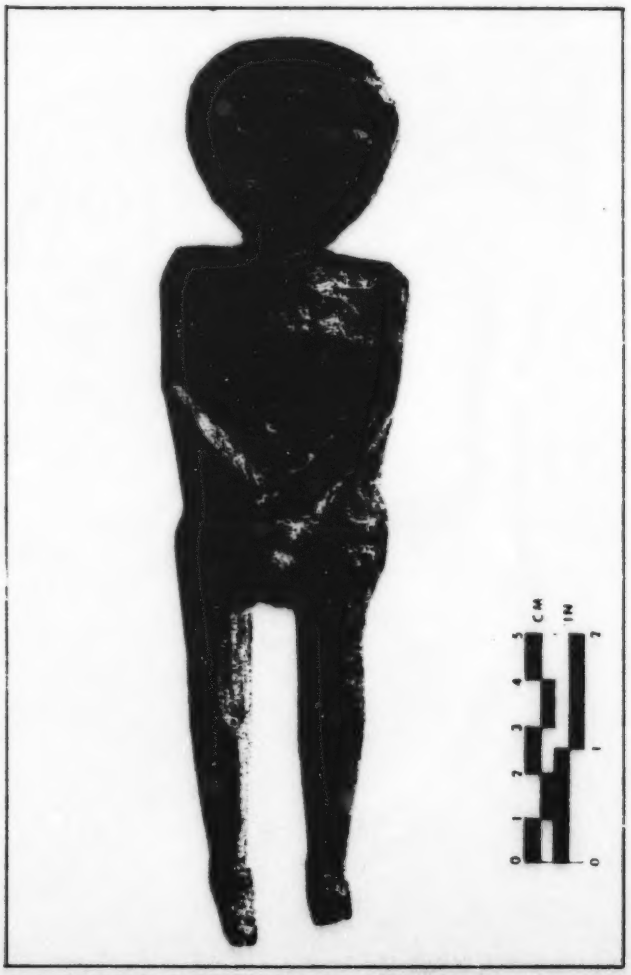
Shanawdithit's drawing illustrating some methods of food preparation.

Europeans, however, did continue to prey upon Beothuks even though official policy after Palliser provided for the protection of these people. Tragically, this was never to be the case. Fishermen and furriers still resented and feared Beothuks, and the Indians themselves were much too frightened to allow even well-intentioned settlers to approach them. A number of Newfoundland governors even offered rewards to anyone who could bring in a Beothuk who would then, it was hoped, return to his people and explain the new policy. This was a dangerous idea, however, for it may have encouraged Europeans to try to capture Beothuks, and it was quite unrealistic to expect that this could be done without bloodshed.

After this episode, at least two half-hearted attempts were made to contact the Beothuks, but neither was successful. Then in the winter of 1811, Sir John Duckworth sent Lt. David Buchan up the Exploits River with a small armed party. Their mission was to find a Beothuk settlement and to win the Indians' friendship by giving them presents and assurances of the government's good intentions. Surprisingly, Buchan did manage to come upon a small Beothuk camp and even met the Indians on friendly terms. Unfortunately, when Buchan found these Indians he did not have the intended gifts with him. Leaving two of his men with the Beothuks, he set off to retrieve his presents but on returning to the Beothuk camp the lieutenant found it abandoned. The next day Buchan discovered the headless bodies of the two men who had remained with the Indians. Apparently the Indians had panicked, killed the two men and fled. Certainly, after so many years of enmity between the Beothuks and the Europeans, it is not surprising that the Buchan expedition ended in tragedy.

The next significant encounter between Beothuks and Europeans was equally unfortunate. One of the more important furriers and fishermen in Notre Dame Bay at this time was John Peyton Jr.. Over the years, Beothuks had destroyed or stolen many of his belongings. Finally, after Indians had wrecked one of his boats he decided, in his words, "to open a friendly communication" with them. More likely he intended to punish them for his losses. In March of 1819, Peyton led an expedition to a Beothuk camp on Red Indian Lake. After a confused scuffle, they killed one man and captured his wife, a woman named Demasduit, whom her captors later named Mary March. Demasduit lived for less than a year, dying of tuberculosis before she could be returned to her people.

Other than a short vocabulary of Beothuk words, little had been learned from Demasduit about the Beothuks. To remedy this lack of knowledge, a courageous Newfoundlander named William Epps Cormack decided in the fall of 1822, to walk across the



Carved wooden male figure found in a Beothuck child's burial in Notre Dame Bay.

island from Trinity Bay to St. George's Bay. As a guide he took a Micmac named Joseph Sylvester (or Sylvester Joe). It now seems clear, however, that Cormack's guide had no wish to actually encounter any Beothuks, and may well have deliberately led Cormack south of the region in which Beothuks were likely to be found.

Cormack's guide might have been unsuccessful simply because there may have been only twenty or thirty Beothuks left in Newfoundland by 1822. We know this because of the legacy left by a remarkable Beothuk woman named Shanawdithit. In the winter of 1823, Shanawdithit's people had dwindled to about twenty sick, hungry survivors, constantly harrassed by white furriers. In desperation, Shanawdithit, her sister, and mother gave themselves up to William Cull. Cull in turn brought them to John Peyton who took them to St. John's. There Buchan made arrangements to have them returned to their people. Very foolishly, Peyton put the three women ashore in Notre Dame Bay where after wandering about for some time, the women once again gave themselves up to some settlers. Soon after, Shanawdithit's mother and sister died, probably of tuberculosis. Peyton then took Shanawdithit into his home where she worked for him as his servant for about five years.

We can almost be certain that during those five years the rest of Shanawdithit's people died of starvation and disease. In the fall of 1827, Cormack again attempted to seek out the Beothuks. On this occasion he took with him three Indian guides: a Micmac, a Montagnais, and an Abenaki. Cormack made a thorough search of the area in which Beothuks had been known to live, but found no one. Shanawdithit was very likely the last of her people. In her last months, she provided Cormack with a great deal of valuable information, but like so many of her people, Shanawdithit too succumbed to a European disease, dying of tuberculosis in June of 1829.

With Shanawdithit's death, the history of her people came to an end. It was a tragic chapter in Indian-European relations, but despite the many sensationalist accounts that have appeared in recent years, it must be remembered that Beothuks were not hunted for sport, they were not massacred in large numbers by settlers and Micmacs, and they were not treated with unusual cruelty by the Europeans who took their homeland. They were the victims of European expansion, to be sure, but their demise cannot be equated with the deliberate attempts at exterminating whole peoples that have marked our own age.

Ralph Pastore
Summer, 1979

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

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